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CHRIST AND CHRISTIANITY IN THE LIGHT OF MODERN THOUGHT

II.

Three Views of the Bible

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THREE VIEWS OF THE BIBLE.

"No prophecy ever came by the will of man; but men spake from God, being moved by the Holy Spirit."— 2 Peter i. 21 (Revised Version).

I SHALL speak to-day of three views of the Bible, — that which makes of it a fossil, that which regards it as a collection of atoms, and that which considers it as having soul and body, or an organized life.

The first, or fossil, view of the Bible need not detain us long; for it is rapidly passing away. A fossil is the form of an animal from which life is departed. When the animal was alive, it moved freely to and fro, changed its substance by growth and decay; but, after it becomes a fossil, it remains fixed in the solid rock, unchangeable forever. So the words and deeds of prophets and apostles, as they stand in the Bible, are supposed by this theory to be hardened into rocky permanence, unchangeable forever. It is all one rock-bound, infallible revelation, from Genesis to Revelation, — one part just as divine as the other. The Bible is considered as one book, and all between its lids as the word of God. The lists of the names in the Book of Chronicles are just as much inspired as the Lord's Prayer, the story of Jonah equally authentic with the history of the resurrection. This theory ignores all progress of thought in the Bible. The theology of the Book of Job must correspond with that of the Gospel of John. If the whole Bible is from God, then the curses of David against his en-

emies and the desperate unbelief of the Book of Ecclesiastes are revealed truth exactly as much as the Sermon on the Mount. Those who hold this view are compelled to force the boundless variety of the Bible into one mould. The most evident contradictions must be smoothed down into an agreement; and the most palpable errors in history, chronology, science, must be denied. The unity thus attained is that of death. The interest goes from the book when it is so regarded. It may be believed to have some charmed mystical power, and may be worshipped as men worship an idol. More often, however, those who profess this belief lay it aside in practice. They select the edifying parts of the book, and let the rest go. They read the Psalms and the Prophets, but not the Book of Leviticus. The result of this fossil view is bad, because it destroys the interest of the Bible as a great mental and spiritual production, and also because it produces infidelity. The strength of a chain is only that of the weakest part. If you make the Bible a chain, every part depending on the rest, if one link breaks, all is gone. If a man finds it impossible to believe the story of Jonah or that of Joshua stopping the sun, if he cannot think that God commanded the Jews to massacre the Canaanites or that he gave the minute directions about the furniture of the tabernacle and the dress of the priests, then he thinks he must give up Christ and Christianity. So he must if this fossil theory is true. But it rests on no foundation. The Bible claims for itself no such infallibility. It is not one book, but a collection, a library of Hebrew literature, written by many different authors at long intervals of time. The Old Testament consists of five books of the law, twelve histories, three

poems, and seventeen prophetic works, — in all, thirty-nine,— and the New Testament of twenty-seven more. They are of very different value. There are large parts which few people care to read ; some parts obscure or unintelligible, of which we say, "I don't know what it means" ; other parts wholly uninteresting to us, of which we say, "I don't care what it means" ; some unedifying or injurious, which we pass by. We leave the chaff, and we take the wheat.

The theory which we have named the Atomistic theory is the natural reaction from this. One extreme produces another. An extravagance of belief runs into an equal extravagance of unbelief. From accepting the whole Bible as infallibly true, men deny the whole as being all false. From believing it all equally and infallibly inspired, they deny its inspiration altogether, and fail to see any divine element in it. It becomes to them a heap of sand, with no organic relation of part to part, no progress or continuous development. They say : "We do not know where the Bible comes from, nor who wrote its books, nor whether any such persons ever existed as Abraham or Moses, or David or Jesus. The stories in the Bible are myths, not histories ; fables invented to illustrate the course of nature. Christ probably means the sun ; the Virgin Mary, the moon ; the twelve apostles, the twelve signs of the zodiac. There are wrong things and bad things in the Bible : therefore, it cannot be a divine book. There are contradictions and errors. So it is not true." This is the theory which takes the books of this Hebrew literature out of their place in history, which cannot explain their origin, or account for their world-wide influence or their amazing

power over the opinions of mankind. It is a theory which stands on no foundation of fact, and makes history a matter of individual opinion.

Therefore, we turn from both these extremes, and look at the Bible, from the standpoint of fact and common sense. This view neither idolizes the Bible nor rejects it. It selects what is true and good and useful, and leaves the rest. It compares the Bible with the sacred books of other races, and sees how much it surpasses them as a revelation of divine perfection and human duty. It sees that the Hebrew people were appointed by Divine Providence to be the teachers of monotheism and spiritual religion to the rest of the world. It accepts this as a fact of history, as significant as it is undeniable. It sees that this collection of sacred books, after passing the fiery ordeal of the freest criticism, still remains unquestionably at the head of the religious literature of the world.

Men say they do not know where the Bible came from. They might as well say that they do not know where the four books of Confucius came from, or where the Vedas came from, or where the Koran came from. The Koran came from the Arabs, the books of Confucius came from China, the Vedas from India, the Bible came from the Jews. In the fourth century the Roman Empire relinquished its own religion and accepted in its place the religion of Jesus which came from Judea, and with it they accepted the sacred books of the Jews. Why did they do so? Not, certainly, because of any prejudice in favor of the Jewish people. It was because they found in this religion higher and nobler views of God and of man, a better morality, a more hopeful, earnest, progressive view of

life, a more generous devotion to humanity. The Bible claimed no infallibility: that is a modern theological invention.

Many people now adopt what is called Agnosticism as the true intellectual position. They are neither atheists nor theists: they do not know whether there is a God or not. They do not know whether there is a future life or not. They consider this attitude wise and modest. Certainly, it is, provided they have no means of knowing and no grounds for believing.

But, in taking this position, these moderns are simply going back to the state of thought which existed among educated men when Christianity came. The civilized world had outgrown its own faith and had found no other. The old religions were virtually dead. People did not know whether there was a God and an immortal life or not. Then the Christian apostles came to them, and said: "We know God by his Spirit, which he puts into our hearts. We know we have passed from death to life because we love the brethren. It is immortal life to know the Father, and Jesus Christ, whom he has sent. We know him more and more as we keep his commandments. He has filled our hearts with his love." The Roman world thus saw men who knew the things unseen and eternal, and perceived that this knowledge gave them perpetual peace and joy, that it enabled them to bear persecution and to lead pure and generous lives. So the Roman Empire by degrees was attracted to this new faith, and, renouncing its polytheism, idolatry, and agnosticism, accepted gladly the knowledge of one God, who is spirit and life and love. Romans and Greeks sat at the feet of

Jesus, the Jewish teacher, heard his words, and called him Master. They took the Hebrew Bible as their Sacred Scripture, and said it was "the Book of books."

There must be some strange and wonderful power in a collection of writings which was able to prevail against so many prejudices, and to become the text-book of religion for the wisest sages and sweetest saints whom the world has known. It has taught the teachers of mankind. It is not because its letter is immaculate, but because its spirit is like a perpetually flowing stream, satisfying thirst, and making a constant verdure wherever it goes. The peculiar power of the Old Testament is that it gives us everywhere the sense of a divine presence in the world. From the naïve narrative of Eden, where God walks in the garden in the cool of the day, on to the time where Jacob says, "Lo! God is here, and I knew it not: this is no other than the house of God and the gate of heaven!"; and to where David tells us how the Lord "maketh him to lie down in green pastures and leadeth him beside the still waters"; and to where the Lord calls little Samuel in the night, and the little boy runs to Eli, thinking it was Eli's voice he heard, not yet knowing the solemn inspiration which was to dwell in his soul; and to where the prophets exhort and rebuke in the name of the Almighty,—all through the Old Testament there is the presence of a living Providence, a watchful Friend, a kind, wise Ruler. This is the spirit of the Old Testament.

But with this we also easily perceive a gradual and steady development of the idea of God from the Book of Genesis to the Sermon on the Mount. At first Jehovah is a tribal deity, the patron divinity of Abraham and his

family, yet still higher than any other God. In the Book of Genesis, Jehovah is the most high God, Maker of all things, but not the only God. In the time of Moses he becomes the all-holy and all-just God, loving righteousness and hating iniquity. But still he is the God of the Hebrews more than of other races. The descendants of Abraham are his peculiar people. In the time of David the idea of Jehovah is still further developed. The element of forgiving love comes in, of gracious, kindly care. Obedience is made more sweet by the infusion of trust and confidence. The idea of the prophets is of a still loftier character, and they see in God the majestic, all-surrounding Presence, the eternal Providence, the infinite Spirit. So the idea of the Deity moves upward in the Hebrew mind till, in Jesus, God becomes the universal Father; and since then no further development has taken place, for none was possible. When the infinite Presence, the perfect Being, the order of the universe, the almighty, omniscient, omnipresent Power, above all, through all, and in all things, is also known as the personal Friend and Father of every living creature which he has made, then the unity of conception is at last reached, beyond which we cannot go. Accordingly, for two thousand years nothing has been added to that conception of God which Jesus reached. The Roman Catholic Church has tried to do so by its deification of womanhood in the Virgin Mary, making of her a sort of fourth person in the Trinity. But, if we consider it, the Father whom Jesus taught included the idea of father and mother alike. The father of the prodigal son, who received the erring child with an unconditional love, was the expression of all a mother's heart.

The Father of creation, without whom no little bird drops dead unnoticed, is father and mother both. It was only because the Church had first enthroned Christ as a stern judge, and hardened in its own imagination that loving heart, that it became necessary to reintroduce the womanly element in the form of the Virgin Mother.

Every true man has in him the womanly element also. He has, with his force, tenderness; with his masculine reason, feminine insight. It is only the half-man who exaggerates manliness into overbearing, untempered will. The mediæval knight and modern gentleman join with courage a refined and tender sympathy. It is all expressed in one word,— a gentle-man.

And so every true woman has in her soul the element of manhood also. She joins to loving sympathy a refined conscience, fidelity, and fortitude. The best man speaks the truth in love: the best woman loves not blindly, but with a reverence for all nobleness and truth.

In Jesus these two elements are harmoniously joined. With courage, insight, fortitude, and uncompromising energy of conviction, he united so much of tenderness that to this day his manliness is almost lost sight of, and people speak of the "mild and gentle Jesus," as if his virtues were mainly passive, and his character only that of a suffering saint. They forget that he was the most radical and determined reformer the world has ever seen; one whose indignation against a hypocritical, overbearing priesthood was a consuming fire; one before whose concentrated force of soul Paganism and Judaism both crumbled away, and whose imperial energy made him at last the monarch of civilized man.

Thus we see how the Bible is not a fossilized formula, nor a collection of unrelated atoms, but a living whole. The unity of the Bible is in its spirit, not in its letter. It is like life, progressive; like life, residing in all parts of the body, vitalizing every organ, but not limited to any. The Bible is thus "many members, but one body." It has feet, hands, heart, head, eye, and voice. The historic books are the feet, beautiful on the mountains, by which it carries its good tidings forward from epoch to epoch. The prophetic books are its voice, which cries aloud to a sleeping world, announcing judgment and proclaiming a gospel, denouncing woe against a proud tyrant and pardon to the humble. The great central truths which pervade the Bible are like the forces of human intelligence, and the comfort and peace it brings to the sufferer are like the sympathies of the human heart. Thus it is an organic whole, vital in every part; yet its unity is not of the letter, but of the spirit. You may find many errors, contradictions, inconsistencies, mistakes in the letter; but all this does not touch the spirit. This is what gives the Bible authority,— not because of any infallibility of language, but because it is throughout a revelation of heavenly truth and heavenly love. This I call the view of the Bible as a living organism.

There are two ideas which are popular with modern thinkers, — that of "Evolution" and that of the "Survival of the Fittest." We find both of these ideas involved in this conception of the Bible as a living organism.

However it may be with the animal kingdom, it is certain that human history advances by a process of development or evolution, by a progress of ideas. This progress

is often interrupted by catastrophes, so that crisis and development both play an important part in human progress. Nations rise and fall; civilizations have their summer development and their winter frosts; religions appear and disappear. But, amid all change, mankind advances, every race and every century bringing its contribution to the sacred treasury of humanity. The Bible also indicates in its long story this succession of conflicts and progress; an advance from truth to truth by mingled success and failure. Thus the Bible taken as a whole illustrates this law of evolution and development.

It also illustrates the other law of the survival of the fittest. How do these books come together? Who collected them? We find in the Old Testament mention made of many other Hebrew books now wholly lost, such as the Book of Jasher and the Book of Wars of the Lord. We find a large apocryphal New Testament literature, which existed when the Christian Scriptures came together. Before our New Testament collection was finally completed, there were many other gospels and epistles besides what we have. There was the Gospel of the Infancy of Jesus, the Gospel of Marcion, of the Ebionites, the Clementine Gospel, the Gospel of the Egyptians. There were hostile gospels, written with the purpose of defaming and opposing Jesus. There were other gospels and epistles written by the friends and enemies of Paul,— the Gospel of Truth, that of Eve, that of Perfection, the Gospel of Philip and of Judas. Many of these are lost, but some fortunately remain,— fortunately, because they show us plainly why the rest were dropped. Compared with our New Testament writings, some are puerile, some insignifi-

cant, some absurd, and the best of them without special value; not very good for doctrine, reproof, or comfort. They bear little or no fruit. They cumber the ground. Some of the best, like the Epistles of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas, found their way into the New Testament, and made a part of it for two or three hundred years, and then fell out and disappeared. We see, therefore, that the principle by which our New Testament was collected was the survival of the fittest. It was that which Emerson has laid down, and which is the true canon of criticism,—

> "One accent of the Holy Ghost
> The heedless world hath never lost."

The true Bible was not only written on papyrus and parchment, but on the living tablets of the heart. What did men good, that they kept. They knew the tree by its fruits. They said, "This gospel or epistle bears no good fruit, let it go: this one is covered with grapes and figs, it is a good tree, therefore keep it." It was not by any blind chance that these writings came together, but by the divine law which says,—

> "What is excellent,
> As God lives, is permanent."

If not a sparrow falls to the ground without the Father, we may well believe that a Divine Providence guards, by eternal laws, the safety of those Scriptures which are sacred books because forever feeding with living bread from heaven the mind and heart of man.

Men have been much afraid that, if the doctrine of infallible inspiration be given up, the Bible will be abandoned,

too. The Bible rests on no such artificial theory. It is founded on the everlasting power of truth and the eternal needs of the human soul. It is a living, organic whole, filled with life, some parts more vital, some more important, than the rest, but selected by the only infallible inspiration we know,— the great experience of mankind, which always discovers in the long run what is good for it and what it needs. There is no one man, however wise, no critic, however acute, whose judgment is as valuable as the final opinion of thinking men in regard to questions of vital interest and importance. The books which mankind have pronounced to be the most valuable, after centuries of study, will probably remain forever objects of reverence and affection. Occasionally a critic arises who thinks that Plato is overrated, that Cicero or Virgil or Horace were not men of genius. Johnson did not think a great deal of Milton. Voltaire regarded Shakespeare as a very inferior writer. And so there are critics to-day who cannot see anything sublime in Isaiah or profound in Paul.

Let this be our consolation when assailed by doubts and fears in dark hours of scepticism and unbelief, when some wild tornado of low thoughts and destructive opinions sweeps over society. All these things are temporary. In such times let us do our duty and fear nothing. It may be that God means to try us as silver is tried or as steel is tested in the furnace. There are dark days in church history, dark days in political history. Such times distress and mortify us. But, if we do our duty aright, we have nothing to fear. The Lord reigns; and so truth, justice, purity, honesty, must triumph. This life is a perpetual battle between good and evil: all we have to do is to fight the good fight to the end.